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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a state-of-the-art examination of the literature addressing humor in leadership. A theoretical rationale is developed for the importance of humor as functional communication, especially as it relates to leadership. Research from several disciplines relevant to the use of humor in leadership is organized and synthesized. Practical applications of humor are presented on what may help leaders improve their communication skills not only by learning to use humor personally, but also by learning to use humor within their organizations. Based upon the literature review, the paper concludes that humor is a useful, but delicate, communication tool for leaders. Contains over 200 references. (Author/EH)

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Humor in Leadership:

State of the Art in Theory and Practice

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HUMOR IN LEADERSHIP

STATE OF THE ART IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Abstract

Humor plays an important communicative function within organizations. It is imperative, then, for leaders and managers to learn to incorporate humor into their repertoire of communication skills. Furthermore, leaders should learn to motivate and manage humor activities within the organization. This paper presents a state-of-the-art examination of the literature that addresses humor in leadership. A theoretical rationale is developed for the importance of humor as functional communication, especially as it relates to leadership. Research from several disciplines relevant to the use of humor in leadership is organized and synthesized. Practical applications of humor are also presented which may help leaders improve their communication skills not only by learning to use humor personally, but also by learning to use humor within their organizations. Based upon the literature reviewed, it is concluded that humor is a useful, but delicate, communication tool for leaders.

HUMOR IN LEADERSHIP:

STATE OF THE ART IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Many scholars have recognized the important communicative role that humor plays within organizations. For example, Foot (1986) wrote that humor is a tool by which social actors attempt to achieve functional ends. Foot suggested that, functionally, there are few more useful social skills than humor. If Foot is correct, then it is imperative for leaders and managers to learn to incorporate humor into their repertoire of communication skills. This paper will examine humor in leadership from a functional perspective. First, a presentation of functional leadership theory and of the principal humor theories provides a background for further discussion of humor in leadership. Second, relevant theory and research of humor as functional communication is discussed. Finally, some practical applications of humor are presented.

Theory and Research

In order to appreciate the role of humor in leadership, especially as a form of communication, a brief review of both leadership theory and humor theory is required. First, leadership is discussed from a functional approach, which most appropriately informs a discussion of humor in leadership. Second, because practical use of humor presupposes some level of knowledge, definitions and theories of humor are outlined. Next, theory and research about functional humor as related specifically to the leadership arena are presented. Finally, some observations and comments are made regarding humor in leadership.

Leadership Theory

Leadership is usually considered a social influence process, whereas leader typically refers to a person who occupies a position within a group structure (Fisher, 1985). Brilhart and Galanes (1989) asserted that leadership is widely accepted to be defined as "interpersonal influence, exercised in a situation and directed, through the communication process, toward the attainment

of a specified goal or goals" (Tannenbaum, Wechsler, & Massarik, 1988, p. 484). Similar definitions have been proposed by others (Hoy & Miskel, 1991; Shaw, 1981). Such a definition suggests that a functional perspective is useful for explaining the leadership process. Therefore, this section describes a functional view of leadership with emphasis on the communicative behaviors performed by leaders. The section concludes with the development of a rationale for the use of humor as a communicative tool for leadership.

There are several different theoretical perspectives through which leadership can be explained. An examination of several texts reveal five primary viewpoints on leadership: trait, styles, situational or contingency, power, and functional (Brilhart & Galanes, 1989; Daniels & Spiker, 1987; Fisher, 1980; Hoy & Miskel, 1991; Jensen & Chilberg, 1991; Napier & Gershenfeld, 1987; Schultz, 1989). Most contemporary prevailing theories of leadership adopt a contingency approach (Adler, 1989; Chemers, 1988; Fisher, 1986) or a functional perspective (Jensen & Chilberg, 1991; Schultz, 1989). From a *contingency* approach, researchers believe that leadership success requires both personal dimensions and situational variables. That is, the best leadership style is flexible and will allow leaders to emphasize a task or relationship strategy appropriate to the particular situation. Familiar theories have been developed from a contingency approach include Blake and Mouton's managerial grid, Fiedler's contingency model (least preferred coworker), House's path-goal theory, and Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory.

A *functional* view of leadership focuses on leadership behaviors that are performed rather than describing the traits or styles of persons who act as leaders. Researchers using a functional perspective have come to understand that there are two primary dimensions of leadership behaviors: *task* and *social* (Fisher, 1980; Hoy & Miskel, 1991). For example, Bales (1950) identified specific categories of behaviors that he grouped into the general dimensions of task

functions and socioemotional functions. Task functions move the group toward completion of its task, whereas socioemotional roles are oriented toward the functioning of the group itself. Other researchers have also studied distinctions between task and social leaders (Bales, 1958; Bales & Slater, 1955; Burke, 1967; Slater, 1955), between instrumental and expressive needs (Etzioni, 1965), between goal achievement and group maintenance objectives (Cartwright & Zander, 1968), between group task roles and group building and maintenance roles (Benne & Sheats, 1948), and between initiating structure and consideration functions (Hoy & Miskel, 1991).

The common denominator from the contingency and functional perspectives is the recognition of both task and relationship dimensions of leadership. Although earlier theorists suggested that mutually exclusive leadership behaviors (or two leaders) are necessary for task achievement and for group maintenance, more recent researchers have proposed that the two dimensions are interdependent (Fisher, 1980; Rees & Segal, 1984; Wheeless, Wheeless, and Dickson-Markman, 1982). That is, every leadership communication act reflects both a task and a social dimension. Therefore, the functional perspective of leadership communication is concerned with task and social behaviors that help groups to function more effectively and efficiently. This functional view has also been applied to the use of humor as a form of communication (Graham, Papa, & Brooks, 1992).

Similarly, a number of papers from the leadership literature have discussed the use of humor by leaders. Although some have suggested that a sense of humor is simply a critical *trait* of leaders (Corey & Corey, 1982), others have emphasized the *functional role* of humor. For example, Benne and Sheats (1948) described jesting as one of the behaviors indicative of the harmonizing function of group maintenance. Bales (1950) identified joking and laughing as representative of the positive socioemotional function of showing tension release. Fisher (1980) proposed that a "joker" group member can function in an informative task role, a harmonizing

maintenance role, and in a detrimental individual role. Brilhart and Galanes (1989) cited the importance of humor as a leadership function to help reduce tensions among group members.

Husband (1988) recommended that productive leaders "need to see choices about communication as central to everything that will happen within the small group" (p. 535). Clearly, humor serves as an important communication choice for leaders. Before examining this communicative function of humor in more detail, however, it is necessary to understand the nature of humor. Therefore, the next sections describe several definitions and theories of humor.

Definitions of Humor

In order to understand how humor is used to perform certain communicative functions by leaders, humor must be defined. However, humor has been difficult for scholars to define (Apte, 1985; Goldstein & McGhee, 1972; Lewis, 1989). Berlyne (1972) noted that "humor is unique in the sense that it can hardly be mistaken for anything else" (p. 44). Martineau (1972) described humor more specifically as a distinctive type of medium of communication by which persons convey information during interaction. Chapman and Foot (1976) reported that three types of definitions have been considered in the literature: humor as stimulus, humor as response, and humor as disposition.

As a *stimulus*, humor is any communication specifically intended to provoke laughter or smiling (e.g. a joke). Humor has been studied often as a stimulus from the context of public speaking (Gruner, 1985; Markiewicz, 1974). Also, scholars have simply categorized types of humor as stimuli or described conditions under which humor may be experienced (Keith-Spiegel, 1972; Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991). From a sociological perspective, Fine (1984) defined humorous interactions specifically in terms of intentional attempts to provoke mirth and Ziv (1988) offered that humor can be defined simply as any social message intended to stimulate laughter or smiling.

As a *response*, humor often has been operationalized as the amount of laughter or smiling observed in a situation. Coser (1959) argued that laughter cannot be studied without also discussing humor, or that which elicits laughter. It should be noted that humorous laughter can be defined as an involuntary physical expression of amusement (Morreall, 1987). Indeed, many definitions and theories of humor, which are intended to explain why something is funny, are actually theories of laughter, which explain why people laugh (Zijderveld, 1983). Finally, researchers who have investigated humor as a *disposition* have studied individuals' reactions to humor, humor appreciation, or humor comprehension. These scholars are interested in the personality trait that is generally considered "sense of humor."

A comprehensive definition of humor as communication should contain elements of each of these perspectives. Therefore, the following functional definition of humor developed by Martineau (1972) is proposed: any [intentional] communicative instance which is perceived as humorous by any of the interacting parties" (p. 114). Similar definitions have been accepted by a number of humor researchers (Consalvo, 1989; Coser, 1960; Duncan, 1985). When studying humor, however, it is necessary not to define humor, but also to understand the theoretical traditions of humor research. The next section, therefore, provides a general overview of the three primary theoretical perspectives that have driven most humor research.

Theories of Humor

There have been many theories proposed by researchers of humor (Gruner, 1978; Haig, 1988; Morreall, 1987). These theories have typically fallen into one of three broad theoretical perspectives: superiority theories, incongruity theories, and relief theories (Berlyne, 1969; Foot, 1986; Morreall, 1983, 1987). Although no one theory is comprehensive enough to explain humor alone, some combination of theories may adequately explain all aspects of the phenomenon of

humor (Kuhlman, 1985; Morreall, 1983). What follows is a brief examination of these three primary perspectives of humor.

Perhaps the oldest theoretical perspective of humor, *superiority* theories contend that all humor originates from one's feeling of perceived superiority over another or over one's previous situation. Hobbes' (1651/1958) derision theory is the cornerstone of modern superiority theories (Foot, 1986; Morreall, 1987). Hobbes suggested that "sudden glory is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter, and is caused either by some sudden act of their own that pleases them or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another" (p. 57). Much of the research that examines humor from a superiority perspective deals with aggressive, disparaging, and self-deprecating humor, which elevates individuals above the target of the humor (Gutman & Priest, 1969; Stocking & Zillmann, 1976; Zillmann, 1983; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976). Indeed, Zillmann and Stocking (1976) suggested that "disparagement of others underlies much of what we consider funny" (p. 154).

The second main avenue of research on humor has been from an *incongruity* perspective. Incongruity theories address with the cognitive processes involved in perceiving humor and reacting to incongruities. Scholars have taken two primary directions in studying the incongruity of humor. The first direction of incongruity theory suggests that humor results from the surprising discovery of an incongruity itself (Berger, 1976; Nerhardt, 1976; Schopenhauer, 1896; Shurcliff, 1968). For instance, an oxymoron such as "jumbo shrimp" is an incongruity that may cause a humorous response. The second direction, incongruity-resolution theory, considers humor to be a reaction to discovering that two seemingly incongruous elements are actually related (Suls, 1983). When someone does not "get" a joke, it may be because he or she did not make the connection between the two elements. For example, a person may fail to see the humor of a dog named "Tiny" without knowing that the dog is actually a Great Dane.

The final perspective, *relief* theory, includes a variety of theories that fall into the psychological and physiological domains. The common ingredient among these theories is the belief that laughter is a release of repressed or unused energy. Freud's psychoanalytic theory has been the most influential theory of this type (McGhee, 1979). Freud (1905/1960) suggested that laughter is an outlet for psychic or nervous energy, particularly sexual and aggressive inhibitions. Additionally, two types of arousal theories have gained acceptance as theories of humor and laughter (Berlyne, 1972; Godkewitsch, 1972; Langevin & Day, 1972). The first approach is that humor itself raises a person to a state of arousal, which causes pleasure; to balance this arousal, the person laughs. The second approach is that an individual is aroused to such an uncomfortable state by a joke or a situation as it develops that the humorous punchline or ending, and thus the removal of the discomfort, causes pleasure and laughter. As Giles, Bourhis, Gadfield, Davies, and Davies (1976) theorized, failure to perceive or comprehend the humor, and thus failure to relieve the discomfort, would bring only frustration.

These three perspectives of humor are not exhaustive, but do represent the basis of a large majority of humor research. Many scholars agree that aspects of each perspective are necessary to a comprehensive theory of humor, but that none are sufficient to explain it alone. Therefore, several have attempted to develop a theory that combines aspects of each perspective. For example, La Fave, Haddad, and Maesen (1976) suggested that an adequate theory of humor must involve "a sudden happiness increment [such as a feeling of superiority, relief, or arousal] consequent to a perceived incongruity" (p. 86). Similarly, Morreall (1983) theorized that "laughter results from a [sudden] pleasant psychological shift" (p. 39). Additionally, many theorists believe that humor must contain some metacommunicative cue that "this is humor" (Fine, 1984; Linstead, 1985; Suls, 1983).

This section has presented definitions of humor and three theoretical traditions of humor research. With this understanding of humor, it is possible now to discuss the use of humor as functional communication. The next section reviews literature relevant to leadership which has examined humor from a functional perspective.

A Functional Perspective of Humor

The following section examines more closely the functional role of humor in a variety of communicative relationships that leaders may face. A functional perspective of humor takes an applied approach by focusing on the *uses* of humor (Brooks, 1991; Graham, Papa, & Brooks, 1992). Therefore, the following review of the literature discusses the communicative nature of humor in interpersonal, group, and organizational situations. Uses of humor by members of problem solving groups are also presented. Finally, some general observations about humor in leadership are presented and some conclusions are drawn from the review of literature presented here.

Humor as Functional Communication

Researchers have studied the social role of humor as a form of communication, particularly within group processes (Hertzler, 1970; Pollio & Bainum, 1983). Humor has been confirmed as a socially facilitated phenomenon; that is, laughter is more likely to occur in the presence of others (Brown, Dixon, & Hudson, 1982; Chapman, 1974; Malpass & Fitzpatrick, 1959; Neuendorf & Fennel, 1988). Many scholars have argued that humor itself, as contrasted with laughter, facilitates a number of communicative functions. Although many have reaped unconditional praises on the use of humor (Debats, 1983; Nolan, 1986; Sleeter, 1981), others have recommended more caution. For example, Martineau (1972) proposed that humor can be viewed as both a "lubricant" and as an "abrasive" in social interaction. As a lubricant, humor functions to initiate social interaction and to keep conversations moving freely and smoothly. As

an abrasive, however, humor may cause interpersonal friction that can modify the nature of the interaction. Similarly, Bales (1970) described humor as both a potentially integrative and a potentially disruptive behavior. Malone (1980) suggested that humor is a "double-edged tool" (p. 357) which may both help and hurt interaction. Because humor is so enigmatic as a form of communication, researchers have attempted to better understand how it functions.

Graham, Papa, and Brooks (1992) found that positive uses of humor, such as developing friendships and being playful, are positively correlated to communication competence. Others have also studied uses of humor in relation to interpersonal skills. For example, humor can be used to avoid discussing difficult topics or to introduce new information (Ullian, 1976). Individuals can use humor to facilitate self-disclosure (Avant, 1982), to help probe another's values or motives (Kane, Suls, & Tedeschi, 1977; Linstead, 1985), or to introduce topics that may otherwise be socially inappropriate (Davis & Farina, 1970; Winick, 1976; Ziv, 1984). Humor can also be used as a coping mechanism for managing anxiety and embarrassment by diverting attention from the situation that caused the embarrassment (Fink & Walker, 1977; Ziv, 1984, 1988). Humor can be used to distance unpleasant, stressful, or boring parts of our lives by allowing us to regard them with less seriousness (Berkowitz, 1970; Coser, 1959; Linstead, 1985; Martin & Lefcourt, 1983; O'Connell, 1960; Schill & O'Laughlin, 1984).

As a means of social control, humor may function as a control mechanism to express approval or disapproval of actions, especially disapproval of violations of group norms (Kaplan & Boyd, 1965; Klapp, 1949; Webb, 1981; Winick, 1976). By humorously making an example of inappropriate conduct, humor can be used not only to control behavior, but also to reinforce group norms and values (Stephenson, 1951). Collinson (1988) found that joking placed social pressure on workers to conform to cultural norms and motivated workers who were not meeting work standards. Bradney (1957) concluded that some humor functioned to control conflict

caused by competition among coworkers and that joking was used to sanction individuals, both formally and informally. Bricker (1980) determined that humor, particularly in the form of joking relationships, was both a mechanism of social control and a tension-reducing device.

The control functions of humor have also been studied from the perspective of social status. Duncan and Feisal (1989) determined that humor helps equalize status among group members, helps new members assimilate into the group, and helps members to feel a part of the group. Similarly, Coser (1960) wrote that "in laughter, all are equal" (p. 111). Most of these studies, however, have found that humor helps define and maintain social groupings and reinforce both social and positional rankings (Boland & Hoffman, 1982; Duncan, 1982; Traylor, 1973). Even Coser found that humor tended to be directed downward in a hierarchical organizational structure, that is, higher status persons tended to target lower status colleagues with their humor. Lundberg (1969) also found that lower-ranking group members tend not to "joke back" with higher status members. Bradney (1957) also found that joking relationships among members of the same status level occur most often, but that when joking occurs between status levels, it is typically aimed downward.

Many researchers have found that humor functions to reduce and manage social distance among individuals (Cheatwood, 1983; Sherman, 1985). For example, the use of humor can help to facilitate interpersonal attraction and thus help develop friendships (Derks & Berkowitz, 1989; Mettee, Hrelec, & Wilkens, 1971). Humor can also reduce social distance by managing stress and reducing tensions between individuals or among group members (O'Connell, 1960; O'Quin and Aronoff, 1981; Smith, Ascough, Ettinger, & Nelson, 1971; Stephenson, 1951). Humor can serve the function of gaining approval. If others can be made to laugh -- a pleasurable experience -- that may dispose them to evaluate the joker's character and viewpoints more favorably (Giles,

Bourhis, Gadfield, Davies, & Davies, 1976). Scogin and Pollio (1980) determined that humor also can be used to express appreciative or positive feelings.

In small group research, the reduction of social distance typically is expressed in terms of group cohesiveness. A great deal of research has examined the role of humor in developing cohesion among group members. For example, Kaplan and Boyd (1965) suggested that humor may enhance morale by decreasing social distance of group members, by forestalling conflict, and by providing common ground. They also found that individuals use humor as an expression of support or affection, and as a way to give new members a sense of belonging. Linstead (1985) wrote that humor is a form of symbolic activity that reinforces the social structure and the subculture of a group. Pogrebin and Poole (1988) presented three functions of humor that operate to build and maintain group cohesiveness. First, humor allows group members to share common experiences and to probe the attitudes, perceptions, and feelings of other group members in a nonthreatening manner. Humor helps to translate an individual's concern into a group issue, thus reinforcing group solidarity. Second, humor promotes social solidarity through the mutual teasing which allows group members to realize that they share a common perspective. This "laughter of inclusion," as well as humor aimed at people outside the group, helps to define social boundaries. Third, groups utilize humor as a coping strategy in managing a variety of forces beyond their direct control. For example, "gallows humor" allows group members to laugh at their plight, demonstrating community and reinforcing group cohesion (Obrdlik, 1942). Group members use humor to show empathy with each others' feelings and to allow emotional distancing from a topic by normalizing extraordinary situations.

Reference group theory has also impacted humor research. From a reference group perspective, one's membership or lack of membership in a particular group affects how one will react toward the use of humor (La Fave, Haddad, & Maesen, 1976). For example, Martineau

(1972) theorized that if the humor is judged to esteem the group, it functions to solidify the group. However, humor that disparages the group may also solidify the group, or it may (a) control behavior of group members, (b) foster conflict in the group, or (c) foster demoralization within the group. Fine (1976) concluded that humor not only may bond members, but also may form a barrier to outside groups. Linstead (1985) suggested that in defining boundaries, humor directed toward persons outside the group may clarify both social and moral boundaries.

From an organizational perspective, humor can be used to help socialize new members into the culture of the organization (Vinton, 1989). Specifically, Vinton found that humor appears to create bonds among employees and facilitate the accomplishment of work tasks. Vinton (1989) also found that self-deprecating jokes told other members that the joke-teller had a sense of humor and was willing to participate in the predominant form of humor in the organization: teasing. This teasing functioned in two ways: as task-specific joking that dealt with a work-related task and as social teasing which involved nonwork issues.

Deal and Kennedy (1982) proposed that organizational humor, as a form of play, bonds people together, reduces conflict, creates new visions, and regenerates cultural values. Similarly, Lundberg (1969) suggested that humor can assist organizational members in earning and maintaining a sense of social inclusion, especially by easing tension and boredom and by providing social rewards. Additionally, Lundberg suggested that the amount of humor used in an organization may indicate the absence or presence of a cohesive social structure. Blau (1963) noted that joking among workers in a competitive situation helped unite the group by allowing them to laugh together. Coser (1959) also found that humor, in the form of jocular griping, enabled individuals to establish an identity and to arrive at consensus and cohesion by creating a group structure with boundaries. Roy (1960) described humorous ways in which coworkers interact informally within their work group to manage boredom and to maintain satisfaction with

their jobs. Roy concluded that this sort of play brings enjoyment to communication which increases job satisfaction.

In a study that examined the relationship between humor, leadership, and organizational climate of schools, Ziegler, Boardman, and Thomas (1985) determined that cheerful, light-hearted humor was positively correlated with supportive leadership styles and a positive climate. Cornett (1986) suggested that humor is valuable because it attracts attention, provokes thought, helps gain friends, improves communication, helps deal with difficult moments, helps develop a positive self-image, and motivates and energizes. Smith and Powell (1988) concluded that leaders who used self-disparaging humor were perceived as more effective at relieving tension, summarizing group member opinions, and encouraging participation. These leaders were seen as more willing to share opinions than those who disparaged others. Furthermore, humor may be used simply to entertain or gain attention (Boland & Hoffman, 1982; Bricker 1980).

Humor in Group Tasks

Small group theory recognizes the interdependence between leaders and group members (Fisher, 1980). Additionally, leadership is considered to be a property of a group (Cartwright & Zander, 1968) and much of the task and social activity of organizations occurs in groups (Ross, 1989). Consequently, it is worthwhile to examine the literature that addresses humor within small groups. Small group decision making and creative problem solving are of particular interest because they are the most important activities that groups undertake (Poole, 1985).

Scholars recognize two types of common tasks for groups: decision making and creative problem solving (Miner, 1979). Decision making demands a single answer, such as a simple mathematical or logic problem, and requires convergent thinking. Creative problem solving refers to the process of exploring alternatives and generating ideas (Adams, 1986; De Bono, 1970; Scheidel, 1986). Both types of tasks are often required when groups are attempting to attain

goals. In fact, several problem solving models recommend the development of many alternative possible solutions before a decision is made (Albrecht, 1980; Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975; Dewey, 1933; Osborn, 1953; Schultz, 1989; Van de Ven & Delbecq, 1971; VanGundy, 1981). The following sections discuss humor as it is used during the group processes of decision making and creative problem solving.

Pollio and Bainum (1983) suggested that humor can have two effects on group decision making. First, joking and laughing can be seen as attempts to reaffirm common bonds of a group or relieve tensions and thereby allow the group to work more effectively. Second, humor can distract a group from its task by calling attention to some specific tension in the group or to the person making the remark. However, they found that humorous behaviors do not necessarily interfere with a group's task effectiveness. Pollio and Bainum determined that if a humorous remark was related to the problem, it served to facilitate task completion; irrelevant witty remarks distracted the group, however, and decreased efficiency. Additionally, they determined that if a task required sustained interest and much attention to detail, humorous behaviors did not facilitate effectiveness; but if the task required only shorts bursts of interest, humorous behaviors, particularly laughter, seemed to facilitate performance. They also found that joking and laughter may be functionally different: joking interrupted and distracted groups, but laughing usually served to reaffirm the groups socially.

In a study described as an exploratory attempt to understand the functions of humor in small task-oriented group interactions, Consalvo (1989) found that humor tended to occur in patterns associated with particular phases of task-oriented meetings. The initial phase was identified by some negative use of humor as adversarial relationships developed. The second phase, a transitional phase, was marked by consensual laughter at humor that appeared to facilitate communication. The laughter appeared to assist the groups in a transition from a feeling

of tension and defensiveness to a realization of relative safety and playfulness. Third, the problem solving phase was marked by task-oriented efforts and some positive or neutral humor. In some cases a fourth stage was characterized by clustered humorous episodes about the earlier process. Consalvo concluded that humor can be an antidote to the stress of the opening phase and can facilitate the transition to constructive task effectiveness. Similarly, Scogin and Pollio (1980) concluded that nondirected humorous remarks provide a group a brief respite needed to keep the group functioning. Longer episodes of humor seemed to come after the group had come to a resting place or when the group chose to avoid an issue through humor.

The literature also suggests that humor should help groups perform tasks which require creative thought, such as brainstorming projects (Adams, 1974, 1986; Albrecht, 1980; De Bono, 1985; Goodman, 1983; Von Oech, 1990). Specifically, De Bono (1970) stated that "lateral thinking is closely related to insight, creativity, and humour" (p. 9). Ziv (1984) theorized that humor serves to provide a sense of momentary freedom by twisting the usual rules of logical thinking. Von Oech (1990) suggested that humor (a) stretches thinking, which helps develop alternative ideas, (b) promotes ambiguity and the unusual combinations of ideas, and (c) allows conventional rules to be challenged. Von Oech stated that "there is a close relationship between the 'haha' of humor and the 'aha' of discovery" (p. 93). Albrecht (1980) suggested that humor promotes the mental flexibility that leads to innovation. Adams (1986) proposed that humor promotes risk-taking behaviors and helps reduce tension, both of which are essential to creative problem solving. VanGundy (1984) recommended that humor can be effective in promoting creativity within groups.

Researchers have found much to recommend a link between creativity and humor. For example, small groups that use humor deliberately may perform better on problem solving tasks than other groups (Smith & Goodchilds, 1963). Smith and White (1965) reported that groups

which contained wits generally were more efficient at solving problems. Valett (1981) also suggested that humor stimulates the imagination for divergent thinking processes and thus inspires creative ideas. Ziv (1976) concluded that the use of humor may increase risk-taking and reduce anxiety, which may help increase creative thought.

Some Conclusions About Humor in Leadership

Some important issues have not been addressed in the preceding paragraphs. Such issues include gender, race, and ethnic differences in relation to humor. Indeed, there has been very little research, and almost none from a functional perspective, that has studied the question of differences among the uses of humor by women and men, by different ethnic groups, or other such demographic variables. For example, Cox, Read, and Van Auken (1990) indicated that there is a need for more research into differences in how men and women use humor.

Cox et al. concluded that humor is less a part of women's organizational communication repertoire. Mundorf, Bhatia, Zillmann, Lester, and Robertson (1988) reported that gender differences appear to be related to types of humor (e.g. sexual or hostile humor), and concluded that women appreciate both sexual and hostile humor less than men. Similarly, Chapman and Gadfield (1976) discovered that men enjoyed sexist, sexual, and aggressive humor more than women, but that women enjoyed absurdity more than men. Cantor (1976) concluded that regardless of sex, a joke is funnier if it contains a female victim. Decker (1986) found that males prefer aggressive humor more than females. Zillmann and Stocking (1976) found that although women enjoyed self-disparaging humor more, men apparently enjoy a speaker who disparages an enemy. La Fave and Mannell (1976) indicated that ethnic humor may serve several important social functions, not all of which are negative functions. Although we would undoubtedly benefit from more knowledge about how women and ethnic groups use and react to humor, it will be

recommended later that sexist, sexual, racist, and ethnic humor are almost never appropriate for leaders to use.

After the theoretical foundations for humor research were outlined and the theoretical bases for studying leadership from a functional perspective were described, literature was reviewed which supported the study of humor as functional communication. This literature consisted of humor research in specific leadership communication contexts, including interpersonal relationships, organizations, and small groups. Many possible communicative functions of humor were identified through the review of this research. The following list, primarily from Brooks (1991) and Graham, Papa, and Brooks (1992), serves to summarize a number of functions of humor that have been identified in the literature:

(1) to manage (reduce or increase) social distance,
(2) to facilitate interpersonal attraction,
(3) to strengthen interpersonal bonds, develop friendships, and build rapport,
(4) to ease self-disclosure and expressiveness,
(5) to avoid discussing a topic or deny the serious intent of a message,
(6) to reduce tension and stress or to help others relax and feel comfortable,
(7) to allow covert communication between individuals,
(8) to enable communication about difficult or socially inappropriate topics,
(9) to allow for social probing about others' thoughts,
(10) to cope with fear or embarrassment or other damage to one's ego,
(11) to entertain or to be playful,
(12) to gain attention or to maintain interest,
(13) to manage (cause or reduce) conflict within interactions,
(14) to reinforce cultural values and norms or to motivate others to meet group norms,
(15) to socialize new members,
(16) to facilitate accomplishment of some work tasks,
(17) to facilitate group cohesiveness,
(18) to relieve boredom and increase enjoyment,
(19) to define boundaries between individuals and groups,
(20) to distance unpleasant aspects of one's life by regarding them less seriously,
(21) to express superiority over others, thereby increasing one's own self-esteem,
(22) to attack others, to demean or insult others, or to express anger,
(23) to express a need for approval,
(24) to remove attention from one's acts,

(25) to express approval or disapproval of others' actions,
(26) to develop and perpetuate stereotypes or to put others in their place,
(27) to manage status differentiations within groups,
(28) to acknowledge allegiances and express support or sympathy,
(29) to control others' behaviors,
(30) to express agreement, appreciation or positive feelings,
(31) to stimulate imagination and creativity by providing escapes from conventional thought,
(32) to illustrate a point or provide an example,
(33) to develop one's sense of humor or to show others one's sense of humor,
(34) to be aggressive or to disarm others who may be exhibiting aggressive behaviors,
(35) to help one adjust to a new role or situation,
(36) to cope with new information or a serious subject, or to change the topic of conversation,
(37) to maintain one's mental and physical health,
(38) to promote retention of material, and
(39) to persuade.

In conclusion, it has been shown that humor does indeed function in many different ways. A review of the functions listed above confirm that humor may indeed play both positive and negative roles in the communication process. Leaders must understand the functional nature of humor not only so that they may use it effectively, but also so that they may use it appropriately. Leaders also are responsible for recognizing and responding to inappropriate humor used by subordinates and peers. The following section discusses the use of humor from a practical perspective. In particular, an emphasis is placed on how leaders can further develop their own sense of humor and also how they can promote positive humor within the organization.

The Practice, Practice, Practice of Humor

The literature reviewed above has confirmed what many have taken to be an implicit truth: humor performs valuable communicative functions that individuals, especially leaders, can use to their advantage. Indeed, humor pervades contemporary organizations and is present in task-oriented meetings in particular (Collinson, 1988; Consalvo, 1989). Consalvo further argued that the role and constructive uses of humor need to be better understood since humor has the potential to improve quality of life, job satisfaction, and performance.

Unfortunately, there is not agreement among all scholars about the benefit of humor in organizations. Indeed, several scholars have found that little research has examined the appropriateness of joking behaviors in the work place (Smeltzer & Leap, 1988) or how humor functions as a leadership or management behavior (Malone, 1980; Smith & Powell, 1988). Most researchers agree, however, that humor can be both a positive and a negative force in groups. Remember that Malone (1980) and others have suggested that humor is a double-edged tool. Because this disagreement exists, it is important that leaders learn what types of *humor behaviors* they can utilize during their interactions with groups and individuals. The next sections will look at some suggestions for developing a personal "sense of humor use" and also for using humor in organizations.

Personal Sense of Humor-Use

Too often only those who can tell good jokes are bestowed with that trait called a sense of humor, a trait that few people are willing to admit they lack (Mulkay, 1988). However, a sense of humor is much more than the ability to tell jokes (Perret, 1989). Just as leadership skills can be learned, so too can humor skills be developed (Perret, 1982). The following section discusses methods that leaders can use to develop their competence in using humor. First, methods for leaders to immerse themselves in humor are suggested. Second, exercises that will help leaders learn to create and use humor are recommended.

Taking a "Humor Bath". Leaders should expand their own knowledge about humor through immersion (i.e. taking a bath), which may in turn help them learn to use humor more effectively. For example, understanding the definitions and theories presented in preceding sections of this paper is a first step. Second, leaders may benefit from knowledge about types of humor. For example, Esar (1952) identified almost 100 different types and techniques of humor, from wisecracks and riddles to spoonerisms and Freudian slips. Hill (1988) and MacHovec

(1988) each provided samplers of many humor types, such as daffynitions, malapropisms, Tom Swifties, and puns.

A third place to learn about humor is from comedy writers. For example, several former television comedy stars and writers have written books on how to create humor (Allen, 1987; Helitzer, 1987; Perret, 1982; Saks, 1985). Although these books are designed to teach how to write and sell comedy material, they provide useful joke formulas and tricks of the trade that may be helpful to someone serious about learning how to use humor. An example of some of the topics covered by Helitzer include (a) how surprise endings and reversals work in comedy, (b) how to create plays on words such as double entendre and simple truth, (c) why the use of triples is a key to humor, and (d) how to use exaggeration.

A fourth possibility for learning more about humor is from public speakers. For example, many introductory public speaking books include chapters on the use of humor in speaking (Allen, 1986; Aslett, 1989; Detz, 1984; Humes, 1988; Nelson & Pearson, 1987; Whitman & Foster, 1987). Books have also been written for the sole purpose of teaching how to use humor in public speaking (Humes, 1975; Iapoce, 1988; Nelson, 1985; Perret, 1984, 1989). These books can show a speaker how to collect material, how to work humor into a presentation, and how to deliver humor effectively. For example, speakers should know that humor must be personal, realistic, and relevant to the topic and to the audience. Therefore, if a speaker borrows humorous material from another source, the speaker should rewrite the material to fit the occasion if necessary. A helpful hint to remember is that a speaker need not be funny, but wit and humor help make a presentation more interesting and fun for an audience (Gruner, 1970, 1978; Nelson & Pearson, 1987). There may even be benefits in retention of material (Hauck & Thomas, 1972; Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977).

Gruner (1985) indicated, however, that speakers must realize that humor does not always lead to persuasion and will not always dispose an audience favorably to a speaker; much depends on the type of humor and the situation. For example, Munn and Gruner (1981) found that "sick" jokes have an adverse affect on the speaker's image and credibility. Zillmann and Stocking (1976) and Hackman (1988) found that speakers who used self-disparaging humor were perceived as less competent and less interesting. Fortunately, others have made more favorable conclusions (Bryant, Comisky, Crane, & Zillmann, 1980; Chang & Gruner, 1981; Gruner, 1970).

A fifth way for leaders to increase their knowledge of humor is to expose themselves to humor on a regular basis or to create a humor library (Hill, 1988). There are a variety of methods for becoming familiar with humor itself. For example, most daily newspapers contain comic strips that can provide a daily dose of humor. Leaders should pay particular attention to cartoons that frequently have relevance to work situations or organizational matters, such as *Ziggy* by Tom Wilson, *Shoe* by Jeff MacNelly, *Sally Forth* by Greg Howard, *The Born Loser* by Art Sansom, *Duffy* by Bruce Hammond, *Cathy* by Cathy Guisewite, *Herman* by Jim Unger, and *Frank and Ernest* by Bob Thaves. Many of these cartoons are available in anthologies and calendars. Also, editorial cartoons are excellent resources for topical humor about current events.

Other humor resources available in which leaders can immerse themselves include syndicated humor columnists and contemporary humorists such as Dave Barry, Erma Bombeck, Art Buchwald, Lewis Grizzard, and Patrick McManus. Watching comedy routines of comedians like Roseanne Arnold, Bill Cosby, Whoopi Goldberg, and Jerry Seinfeld, or monologues of television talk show hosts such as Arsenio Hall, Jay Leno, and Joan Rivers, can show leaders different examples of humor styles and deliveries. Joke books (Rudin, 1984), collections of general humor (Berle, 1989; Fadiman, 1985; McKenzie, 1980; Novak & Waldoks, 1990; Shalit, 1987), and collections of specific humor (Bennett, 1979; Blumenfeld, 1986; Hughes, 1983; Lake,

1975; Moger, 1979) may provide leaders with material for use in their organizations, especially for speaking presentations. *Laughing Matters* is a publication from the Humor Project in Sarasota Springs, NY, that includes anecdotes, interviews with humorists, and other information that may be useful for leaders (Goodman, 1983).

Leaders must learn to observe the humor that occurs around them, particularly at work. In particular, because the sense of humor is very personal in nature (Duncan, 1982), leaders must learn to sense what is and what is not considered funny by others. Leaders also should observe the many different humor styles used by their friends and colleagues. Idle conversation can become a time to share humor instead of talking about the weather. As leaders further develop their own sense of humor use, they can learn to critique and evaluate the humor they use and the humor used by others. It is also important that leaders get feedback from others regarding their own use of humor (Civikly, 1986).

Finally, leaders must learn to see the humor in situations themselves, not only the humor that occurs in situations (Robertson, 1990). A sense of humor is often simply a matter of perspective. In particular, Robertson (1990) recommends asking "what is funny about that?" or "wouldn't it have been funny if...?" when faced with a situation.

"Humorobics". Beyond simply reading and watching humor, leaders can do humor exercises to help them become more proficient in the use of humor. Perret (1990) has written the *Comedy Writing Workbook* that provides numerous workouts for creating humor. Others have also provided exercises to help individuals create and use humor (Kushner, 1990; Metcalf & Felible, 1992; Perret, 1982, 1989; Peter & Dana, 1982). Most of the exercises suggested in the following section have been found by the author to be effective methods of learning to use and create humor.

An example of a workout provided by Perret (1990) involves creating humorous definitions for words. One way to do this is by creating a definition that makes more sense logically than does a dictionary definition. For example, a better definition for "intense" might be "where Lawrence of Arabia kept his soldiers" (Perret, 1990, p. 31). Similarly, one could attempt to create a *sniglet*. Hall (1984) defines a sniglet as any word that should be in the dictionary, but is not. For example, the lines on a grilled steak could be called "sirlines" (Hall, 1984, p. 72). Such wordplay is an important element of much humor (Helitzer, 1987).

Humor breaks can provide important relaxation time during which an individual can review favorite "humor cues" (Robertson, 1990) that are kept in a "sanity file" (Kushner, 1990). Humor cues are toys, jokes, pictures, stories, personal memories, fantasy vacations, songs, and anything else that we have that will remind us to laugh. Metcalf and Felible (1992) recommend doing "humaerobics" during such a break time. Humaerobics are silly noises, peculiar gestures, and funny faces that allow you to take risks with your appearance. Although these exercises should probably be done in private, a mirror might be helpful for full humor impact. For those who do not wish to exert themselves too much, Metcalf and Felible recommend the self-explanatory stand-breathe-smile exercise.

Such humor breaks can be valuable to personal welfare from a health perspective. After Norman Cousins' (1979) book about his recovery from a crippling disease, primarily through the use of laughter, many others have begun to recommend humor for the "health of it." Indeed, mirth and laughter cause our bodies to produce arousal hormones which in turn stimulates the release of endorphins (natural painkillers) into the brain (Peter & Dana, 1982). Morreall (1991) indicated that laughter helps lower chemicals that are associated with stress. Klein (1989) recommends a series of learn-to-laugh exercises, from faking a smile to forcing a laugh after stating a problem out loud.

Perret (1989) recommended that individuals create some hypothetical speaking occasion for which they may need a humorous anecdote or a joke. Then, they challenge themselves to either create a joke or find a story that can be incorporated into the speech. Another method of teaching ourselves to actually create humor is to find a cartoon (a highly visual cartoon such as *The Far Side* by Gary Larson is recommended), cut off the caption, and then create a new caption (Kushner, 1990; Perret, 1989).

Kushner recommends that a change in perspective is critical to learning to use humor and suggests an exercise in which a person brainstorms new functions for an everyday object, such as using a chair as a ladder, as a doorstop, or as a bookmark. Kushner also recommends using the old riddle formula "what do you get when you cross...?" in order to develop perspective. One begins by listing the attributes of the two items to be crossed and then develops a humorous description of the newly created combination. For example, a combination of a woodpecker and a homing pigeon might produce a bird that not only returns home, but also knocks on the door.

Leaders must learn to laugh at themselves. Self-confidence is an important requirement for laughing at ones' self (Paulson, 1989). Robertson (1990) suggested that we must learn to accept things about ourselves that cannot be changed, identify and accept our unique characteristics, and share our mistakes and foibles with others. Metcalf and Felible (1992) call this taking yourself lightly while taking your work seriously.

Once leaders have become familiar with the concept of humor and with humor itself, a little creativity will enable them to incorporate humor into their own practices and habits. The suggestions made in the preceding section are but a start to the many ways a person can learn to use humor. In summary, the often cited three p's of humor provide a handy rule: practice, practice, practice. Therefore, leaders who wish to become truly proficient at using humor should

do their humorobics at least twenty minutes a day, three times a week. Of course, one will need to take frequent humor baths after doing so much exercise!

Organizational "Humor Relations"

Although humor flows naturally and developmentally from a group as it evolves, a leader may benefit from intentionally introducing humor interventions into the group (Napier & Gershenfeld, 1985). These humor relations encourage other organizational members to become involved in humor use and help provide a valuable sense of fun at work (Basso & Klosek, 1991; Bennis & Nanus, 1985). The following section describes ways that leaders can introduce humor relations to their organizations.

Leaders can begin to incorporate humor into organizational life in their own offices (Blumenfeld & Alpern, 1986). Something humorous, yet appropriate, can be displayed in a manager's office to show that the leader has a sense of humor. For example, a piece of artwork from a child may provide the right balance of humor and decorum. Children's artwork is developed from a different perspective than adults and therefore often provides a hint of incongruity that may be amusing. Other possible items include humorous posters or knick-knacks that can be found at many card and gift shops or through mail-order catalogs such as *Miles Kimball* or *Funny Side Up*.

The next place for leaders to look to begin humor relations is in relations themselves. Many of the suggestions in preceding sections emphasize ways to use humor when communicating with others. In order to make humor a habit, leaders must begin by consciously using humor at any appropriate opportunity. For example, Weaver and Cotrell (1987) suggested that simply smiling and being light-hearted and spontaneous may help set a more pleasant tone for relationships. Decker (1988) also suggested that because a smile is what people see when in

conversation, it is a valuable nonverbal communication tool. Leaders can make it a point to share one or two (or three or four...) relevant cartoons or jokes per week with colleagues.

It may be appropriate for managers to include a modest amount of humor in certain memoranda they generate. Indeed, from time to time, it may even be appropriate to send completely humorous memos, such as those included in *Office Humor II* by Fagan and Schaffer (1992) or to use witty post-it notes and fax cover sheets. Bulletin boards can be set aside for humorous material, such as posters, Murphy's Laws (Bloch, 1990), work-related cartoons (such as *Work is Hell* by Groening, 1986), humorous headlines, funny quotes, thoughts-of-the-day (perhaps from Brilliant, 1979), and whatever the organization may feel is appropriate. Contests based on humor and creativity can be posted on the bulletin board. For example, humorous brain teasers from *Games* magazine or the *Big Book of Games* can be used to encourage creative thought in employees. The incentive of an award to the contest also provides an element of fun and friendly competition.

Debats (1983) interviewed Charles Lindner, a *humor relations* consultant, who recommended using humorous posters in the workplace and using humor suggestion boxes in which employees submit cartoons, jokes, or anecdotes about topics relevant to their work. Lindner also suggested taking humor breaks, by showing cartoons or playing comedy cassettes, in conjunction with coffee breaks. In fact, Roy (1960) concluded a classic humor study by suggesting that such a break, or "banana time," increases satisfaction among employees. Kiechel (1983) even suggested that employers can take advantage of special events to help maintain a cheerful environment. For example, employees could come to work costumed for Halloween. A workplace can also take advantage of days like Secretaries' Day and Bosses' Day. Celebration of April Fools' Day should probably be avoided, though, lest things get too out-of-hand.

Other types of humorous activities can also be effective in the workplace. Humorous awards can be given to employees who have done something special. In one organization, a souvenir back-scratcher was awarded at each meeting for individuals who had gone out of their way to help a co-worker. In another organization, employees nominated themselves for the "broken chair award" for embarrassing stories. (The award itself was a part of a chair that had broken when the leader sat in it during a meeting). Fun activities can be used before problem solving meetings to get a group primed for creativity. Such activities include word games, jigsaw puzzles, logic puzzles, and role-playing. Short anecdotes or thoughts-for-the-day may help start meetings on a positive note (Sleeter, 1981; Weaver & Cotrell, 1987).

Lippitt (1982) and Hunsaker (1988) recommended that getting too serious about work may lead to a loss of objectivity about a task. Humor can help maintain that objectivity which is so often required. Hunsaker suggests using humorous exercises that evoke imagination and possibly laughter. For example, brainstorming about group projects may help increase creativity by allowing others to examine both serious and not-so-serious ideas. Another method that has been used was adapted from *Six Thinking Hats* by de Bono (1985). Group members each wear one of six different colored hats which represent six different types of thinking and interaction preferences: devil's advocate, optimism, creativity, neutral objectivity, emotion, and detached overview. Forcing group members to play the role represented by the color hat they wear not only provides insight to the kinds of behaviors that go into group processes, but can even be fun.

The preceding section is but an introduction to the ways in which humor can be used with groups and in organizations. Again, with a little understanding and a little creativity, leaders can begin to develop new and relevant ways to use humor relations. The leader must remember that nothing, including humor, is ever easy when dealing with a large number of people. Just as a sense of humor must develop in individuals, so must an organizational sense of humor develop

gradually. Patience and practice will be required for leaders who wish to create such an organizational change. And because change often causes resistance, leaders must be willing to help educate others in the use of humor at work.

Conclusions

A survey of Fortune 500 executives and deans of business schools determined that 97 percent of the respondents both confirmed and condemned the decline of humor in business (Nolan, 1986). Indeed, a survey of management executives concluded that fewer young executives have a sense of humor (Pinsker, 1982). These more experienced management executives appear to believe that a sense of humor is among the most important characteristics a leader can have. Evidence presented in this paper indicates that there are relationships between the use of humor and several critical leadership functions, including creativity, interpersonal relations, team-building, and relieving tensions.

Leaders must realize that it is their responsibility to create the humorous environment within their workplace. Duncan (1984) found that, in hierarchical circumstances, leaders are perceived as using more humor than subordinates. Krohe (1987) suggested that this may not be because leaders desire to use humor more often, but may be because subordinates fear a negative reaction from their superiors. Given this type of information, it is the leader who must create an atmosphere conducive to humor use. Additionally, leaders must also set the example in regard to what types of humor are appropriate. This humor role-modeling may be the most important function of leadership in respect to humor at work. The handy rule suggested by Goodman (1983) may prove valuable: humor may be laughter made from pain -- not pain inflicted by laughter.

Leaders must recognize that humor is risky, that one may need to "dare to be foolish" (Metcalf & Felible, 1992). Humor may indeed be Malone's "double-edged tool." There are times

and places where humor is not appropriate. For example, Bradford (1976) warned that too much clowning and joking may create an atmosphere of play that interferes with work. Comic relief can help lighten a meeting, but persistent joke-telling can disrupt a discussion. Humor may be acceptable during breaks and certain meetings, but may be less proper during an discipline conference. Furthermore, a leader may need to gauge employee tolerance for humor in meetings; those who are disturbed by the "waste of time" caused by humor may become frustrated and may contribute less to the task. A balance must be maintained. Additionally, there are types of humor that are rarely appropriate. Prejudicial humor (that is, sexist or sexual, racist, and ethnic humor) may never be appropriate in today's workplace (Krohe, 1987; Smeltzer & Leap, 1988). Leaders must take into account the people who follow and realize that inappropriate humor may alienate workers. Such alienation might have a more profound impact on an organization than merely tension between the subordinates and the leader.

Humor is risky indeed. But leadership is risky too. Leaders should utilize all tools that will help them to be more effective at motivating followers, achieving goals, and developing communication relationships. Leaders should not fear fun and humor relations is one of the communication choices available to every leader. With some knowledge and common sense about its use, leaders can use humor effectively as part of their repertoire of communication skills.

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